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ABSTRACT

Some questions concerning foreign language learning and research topics are considered. One discussion question is why education and speech communication research has neglected the special case of second language communication as a source of information on the communication process in general. The need for research into the functional, operational difference between grammar and style is noted. Another disucssion question concerns how some people can pick up a language without formal instruction when staying in a foreign country. A widespread problem of language instruction that researchers have recently begun to investigate is how much English is needed for some blue collar jobs. New approaches start with an analysis of the situation and the operational purposes of communicating. Another discussion question concerns how to determine when a student is beginning to think in a new language and how to adapt instructional techniques to take advantage of it. An additional question concerns how rapidly that skill will decline without practice. A last question concerns how to measure degrees of foreign language skill. (SW)

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SOME UNSOLVED MYSTERIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION

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The title of this paper is meant to establish that it is devoted exclusively to problems and areas of doubt, and not to resolving them. There are at least two reasons for calling these mysteries to your attention. First: If you, or some of your graduate students, are searching for an interesting problem, you will find several here. All that is needed is someone who can restate a mystery as a researchable hypothesis. Second: I may describe something as a mystery that someone here always thought was obvious. Since "obvious" is the word we use when we have no intention of challenging an old belief, such questions may actually be informative or advantageously perturbing.

The first mystery is why researchers in education and in speech communication have so neglected the special case of communicating in a second language as a source of elucidation of the communicating process in general. It is fairly common for both theorists and researchers to look to the communication disorders (aphasia, for example) for hypotheses about how communication ought to work.

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Recently there has been increasing activity on problems of inter-cultural communication, though relatively little by educational researchers of the type assembled here. But the observable fact that many human beings are extraordinarily successful at communicating purposefully either in their native language or in a foreign language has been largely unresearched.

There are several intriguing questions that cluster around this mystery. One has to do with the study of grammatical errors. You have probably read studies which examine the grammatical errors of students of English as a foreign language. I recall a manuscript sent to me by Jack Richards a few years ago. When I examined his collection of grammatically incorrect sentences spoken by foreign students of English, I noticed that I was immediately able to transform each erroneous utterance into its correct grammatical form. I thought it was rather curious that I could <u>always</u> do this. I reasoned that, if I could understand the student's sentence well enough to correct its grammatical errors, the student's sentence must have been <u>sufficiently correct</u> for successful purposive communication. I wrote to Richards and asked him whether his students ever committed an error that left him completely baffled about what they meant, or whether he limited his collection to utterances he could understand, and solely to errors committed in the classroom.

Richard replied that he hadn't thought about it before and didn't know. He seemed less than fascinated by the question, but it still bothers me. It also bothers James Hendrickson, whose excellent article on error correction in last December's Modern Language Journal[1] is mandatory reading for educational researchers interested in language and communication.

Outside the classroom, the most common reason for uttering a sentence--any sentence--is operational: that is, for some purpose other than merely communicating. If that operational purpose is fulfilled, then it might be said that no significant error of grammar has been committed, regardless of how horrendous the sentence might sound to a language teacher.

I have begun to doubt that I know what a grammatical error is. Perhaps most of the errors we automatically think of as grammatical are really only errors of style. I hereby call upon a behavioral scientist somewhere to initiate research into the functional, operational difference between grammar and style. If that strikes you as a simple or even trivial research problem, it is probably because you think the difference between grammar and style is "obvious."

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[1] James M. Hendrickson, "Error Correction in Foreign Language Teaching: Recent Theory, Research, and Practice," Modern Language Journal 57,8 (Dec. 78) 387-398. His review of the literature is as valuable as Hendrickson's own insights.

Just what is the operationally significant grammar of English? If you think that a clear answer to that question lies in a textbook of English grammar, you have probably looked at only one of them lately. Take any two such texts at random, examine them with care, and you will find that the answers they offer are far from identical. In fact, so many linguists claim to provide the best way to describe English grammar, we have to wonder whether any of them is right. The truth, as many discourse analysts observe it, is that many of the so-called rules of English grammar can be violated with no hindrance to communicating. The mystery is how many? Or how many per sentence? Are there certain rules of grammar that are truly immutable in the sense that a violation of any one of these particular rules always prevents or hinders communication? Or perhaps there are several grammatical systems for English, each of which works optimally in its proper situational context. I'm not the first to suggest that. Martin Joos discussed it in his remarkable little book, The Five Clocks,[2] and William Labov, Roger Shuy and others have done some research on non-standard forms of English, but a host of mysteries remain unexplained.

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[2] M. Joos, The Five Clocks, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961).

Is it possible that, at least in certain specifiable operational circumstances, people can do almost anything they want to with English grammar and still communicate successfully? When we read poetry and telegrams, we might suspect so. If we listen to spontaneous conversations between siblings, spouses, or children, we might suspect so.[3]

Much has been made of the fact that the words in a sentence such as, "Just put the groceries on the sink," cannot be ordered at random and spoken as, "Sink on groceries the the put just." But can you imagine any human being uttering such as absurd sentence when actually intending that real groceries would end up on a real sink? That type of example is pure academic fakery and has nothing whatsoever to do with people actually trying to communicate purposefully.

I will go so far as to speculate that, given a real-life circumstance, even that jumbled version, "Sink on groceries the the put just," would cause the groceries to end up on the sink (though it might also elicit additional behaviors or attitudes). I am inclined to believe that there are some universally inviolable rules of English word order, but what they are is still a mystery.

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[3] Cf., E. C. Carterette and M. H. Jones, Informal Speech (Berkeley: Univ of Calif. Press, 1974). This is a fascinating corpus of spontaneous speech, meticulously analysed. Unfortunately, none of it is of purposeful communication; it is therefore free of situational content.

Hordes of ordinary people carry on the daily business of the world quite satisfactorily while speaking their languages in ways that would cause great distress to an eavesdropping language teacher. Yet many teachers seem to prefer not to tell the foreign-language student about these ordinary people and their manner of speaking. Many teachers teach the student only to listen to teacher-type talk, and to talk like a teacher.

Nevertheless, many language students do eventually learn to understand ordinary people. How do they learn that? If ordinary people do not consistently use the grammar that teachers use and teach, how is it possible that students can understand ordinary people?

Some of you may believe that this is no mystery at all and that the answer "obviously" lies in the difference between "surface structure" and "deep structure." If you think about it, however, you will see that discussions that use those two terms do not resolve the mystery for the behavioral scientist, but only provide another way of discussing it. It is extremely difficult to construct researchable hypotheses which contain the term "deep structure."

Which leads us on to another related mystery. We all know that some people can, as the saying goes, "pick up" a language without formal instruction if they stay in a country long enough. Not everyone does this, and not everyone who does acquires a basic coping ability in the language in the same length of time.

Is this a matter of aptitude, or of motivation, or of the individual's ability to devise a personal learning strategy? Or is it all three? If so, in what proportions? What are these learning strategies? Can they be described and taught to others who lack them? Can low aptitude be minimized or circumvented by sufficient motivation, or by instilling effective strategies of learning? Are there some strictly neurophysiological factors of language-learning aptitude that audiological research might illuminate? DLI researchers have tried to develop tests which would predict whether a student might have high aptitude for one language and low aptitude for another. They did not succeed, but the question is far from settled. We don't know enough about foreign-language aptitude to be sure the factors we are measuring are not trainable.

The only sources of stimuli and confirmation for operationally successful utterances come to this self-learner from the real world he or she is trying to cope with. Has anyone ever studied how the adult self-learner's stumbling attempts to communicate in a new language are reinforced or extinguished and finally shaped by the environment?

Some of these people are so successful that we sometimes say things like, "She speaks the language quite well."

Now, there is something curious about that statement; it carries the silent and hidden assumption that she also understands it quite well, just as though that were "obvious." As I talk with some of my foreign-born colleagues, I sometimes wonder if some of them who speak English quite well understand what they hear equally well. The question is not merely theoretical, but could be critical in certain situations.

About a year before the launching of Project Apollo, the joint space exercise in which our astronauts linked up in space with the Russian cosmonauts, someone at NASA in Houston phoned me to ask for advice on teaching Russian to our astronauts. I protested that I didn't know any Russian, so he asked me some general questions about crash courses in languages. One of the problems we discussed was that, if the language instruction concentrated solely on routine space docking maneuvers, the astronauts could get along by learning a relatively small portion of the total Russian language. However, the most critical communication would be during unanticipated emergencies when the cosmonauts, under pressure, might use Russian grammatical structures or words that the astronauts had not learned. I suggested that if NASA could persuade the Russians to speak only in English while our astronauts would speak only in Russian, they would both have better assurance that whatever was said would be understood.

I'm told that's what they decided to do, but I never had a chance to find out if they did and how it worked. There's a nifty little research study for some graduate student. (Complete transcripts of all space talk are usually available from NASA).

The story dramatizes a much more prosaic and widespread problem of language instruction that researchers have recently begun to investigate. How much English does a Chicano need, for example, to learn to be a telephone lineman, or to be a waiter, or a taxi driver? There are several interesting new approaches to this problem and you'll hear about one of them in a few minutes from Hubert Setzler. These new approaches do not start with either linguistics or pedagogy, but with analysis of the situation and the operational purposes for communicating. That is a radically new concept derived from pragmatic considerations. It is basically an engineering solution for which there is very little theoretical foundation. Where is the theory of communication, or of language, or of learning, that might lead us to the <u>best</u> solution to this problem?

It is generally understood that context is required to provide clues as to the intended meaning of words such as "run," which have multiple definitions.

Martin Joos suggested that situational context sometimes provides so much supplementary information that grammatical rules are quite freely and frequently distorted or violated, even by people who speak like language teachers in other circumstances. Shannon and Weaver, writing about information theory twenty-five years ago, introduced the idea that redundancy in the linguistic context helps to elucidate the meanings of words in sentences. They also said that the syntax of English establishes certain probabilities regarding the occurence of specific vocabulary items. But whether similar probabilities can be calculated for grammatical features and how redundancy might operate to elucidate grammatical features of a signal in a noisy system is still a mystery.[4] Notice, too, that when most theorists and researchers refer to redundancy, they refer only to the redundancy supplied by the signal itself. The situational context in which a purposeful utterance occurs almost certainly contributes as much or more redundancy, but little or no research has been done on it--probably because it does not lend itself to the nifty kind of quantification that Shannon devised for signal redundancy.

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[4] For a possible start on this problem, see the article by Fillenbaum in Gordon H. Bower, The Psychology of Learning and Motivation: Advances in Research and Theory, Vol II, (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

It is a mystery to me why linguists, or anyone else working in the other disciplines that are essentially concerned with one human communicating with another, have waited so long to seek data on real human beings, uttering real and purposeful language in real situational contexts.[5]

Irving Lee, the semanticist, used to say that it is irrelevant to ask what a statement means; one should ask instead what the speaker means. Words, said Lee, don't "mean" anything; only people mean things. Lee's advice is more than the mere semantic trick that some have labeled it; it is full of wisdom. Language, Irving Lee was telling us, is something people do--sometimes well and sometimes poorly, for significant or trivial reasons, sometimes to good effect and sometimes not. But the people cannot be left out. The word language may be a noun, but it is fundamentally predicative. For that predicate, the subject and the object are always human beings.

So let us turn our attention now to some people who are learning a second language and some of the mysteries that lurk there.

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[5] As was noted above, even the fine effort by Carterette and Jones does not do this. See also Merrill Garrett's review, in Contemporary Psychology 24.2 (1979), of Sheldon Rosenberg, Ed., Sentence Production: Developments in Research and Theory, (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1977).

One of the often-stated goals of advanced foreign-language instruction is that the students will achieve that state in which they begin to think in the language. We are not entirely clear on what we mean by that, but I will not pursue that particular mystery here. I have sometimes asked advanced students to tell me when they achieved this ability and how they became aware that it was happening. They rarely provide unambiguous replies. Apparently thinking in a second language begins gradually or sporadically over a considerable period of time and students are seldom sure when it started. Sometimes I believe I can detect when foreign students are thinking in English from clues such as the negligible response time between my questions and their answers, or by the fluency with which they express something that I know was not taught in class and that cannot therefore be rote recitation. But I am never certain. Native speakers sometimes grope for words, so one cannot draw clear conclusions about what language students are thinking in when they are similarly disfluent. Since student reports are of little use--at least the informal reports I have sought--and disfluencies are an unreliable indicator, how does one conduct research into this presumably important aspect of language learning? If we knew more about it, could we accelerate progress toward it? Or would we find that we should try to delay it?

If we were able to detect that a student is beginning to think in the new language, could we change our instructional techniques to take advantage of it? Should we, at that time, take even greater pains to correct the students' errors, or should we be more lenient about them as long as the student is speaking intelligibly? Should we call their attention to their disfluencies and take points off our ratings of their speaking ability, as we normally do? Or should we, uh, take off points only if they, uh, exhibit more of them than, uh, your average native speaker of the language?

But let's suppose for a moment that a student has achieved adequate proficiency in a foreign language. It is a costly investment in time, money and anguish. And let us suppose he or she has no opportunity to use it for two months or two years. One of the virtually unresearched mysteries is how rapidly that skill will decline. It is an important question and several others cluster around it. Just how much of what kind of practice is necessary to maintain that hard-won degree of skill? We are not even sure how to go about researching these questions.[6]

Which brings us to perhaps the most frustrating mystery for both the teacher and the researcher of foreign-language communication: how can we measure degrees of foreign-language skill?

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[6] Barbara Freed, Univ of Pennsylvania, is at least trying.

The question has considerable practical ramifications, too, especially when people are being prepared for sensitive military or other governmental jobs, or even for business and industrial positions, which involve dealing with foreign nationals. Of course, it is far from being a single question, since there are a number of quite different skills that must be evaluated, each of a different degree of importance in each of the many different types of jobs.

Many language teachers recognize only four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. There are, however, several others that must be evaluated separately such as transcribing, translating, interpreting, summarizing, and so on. To these we might add all the other types of communication skills such as buying, selling, discussing, debating, interviewing, giving speeches, writing letters, and so on. Then too, we have to ask some questions about reading, such as reading what? Newspapers? Technical reports? And talking and listening to whom? Highly educated diplomats? Laborers? Pilots? Fishermen? Teachers?

It should be clear to an audience of educational researchers that the testing problem is the most critical one of all, for without reliable tests that measure precisely what we want to measure, we are grossly handicapped in researching any of the mysteries I have mentioned here.

But this is not only an audience of educational researchers; it is an audience of educational researchers interested in human communication. It is therefore the ideal audience to ponder the most baffling mystery of all: How does one human being, using any spoken language, actually communicate with another human being? Some of us have finally become disillusioned about communication theories that can be diagrammed with blocks and arrows. We have noted that the blocks have labels, but the arrows, which represent the real mysteries, are always unlabeled, presumably because the processes they represent are considered "obvious." Who will tell us how language communication really works?

Emerson Pugh has said somewhere, "If the brain were so simple that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't."

Perhaps if language communication were simple enough that we could understand it, language would be inadequate to communicate that understanding. I can't decide whether I'd prefer that to be true or false.